
Reflections

Imagination, Affirmation, and Interaction: Reasons for Reading Adam Smith's Moral Philosophy

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Adam Smith is known chiefly for his economic treatise *The Wealth of Nations* ([1776] 1981). Relatively few appreciate his moral philosophy. Even fewer recognize that Smith did not regard himself as an economist. In fact, toward the end of his life he asserted that his earliest work, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* ([1759–90] 1982), whose first edition was published in 1759, when he was thirty-six, was his best (Romilly 1840, 1:403, cited in Phillipson 2010, 274). Perhaps Smith had it right. There are certainly important reasons for reading Smith's book on morals, and they bear relevance to a society riven by social and political faction. Smith's volume enlivens our moral imaginations and assures us that ethical challenges can be overcome. Moreover, it encourages us to engage with those who differ and to employ our imaginations to conceive the world from perspectives we might be reluctant to embrace. In so doing, we move away from faction and from a self-deceit that flatters us as it diminishes others.

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That Smith's moral treatise might incorporate such resonant themes, among many others, may surprise those who think of him only in terms of commerce and trade. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* is itself rather astonishing. Both theoretical and practical, the work incorporates an explanation of how societies come to share a moral consensus, but it also sets forth a set of virtues—benevolence, justice, prudence, and humanity—relevant for modern life.¹ In his remarkable combination of explanation and counsel, Smith indicates how isolation among the like-minded not only encourages self-deceptive judgments of virtue but diminishes respect for others. To sustain a culture of free and decent individuals, we must cultivate our imaginations and encourage interaction with others.

Reasons to Read Smith

Smith is part of a great efflorescence of culture in eighteenth-century Scotland. The Scottish Enlightenment included philosophers such as Francis Hutcheson, Smith's teacher, and David Hume, his great friend, as well as Thomas Reid, his successor at Glasgow. Within the same period, one encounters William Robertson, the historian; Joseph Black, the chemist; James Hutton, the geologist; and Robert Adam, the architect—not to mention James Watt, the inventor; Robert Burns, the poet; James Boswell, the biographer and lawyer; and Sir Walter Scott, the novelist. Like Hume, Smith found inspiration in Isaac Newton's endeavor to systematize via a few principles the varied phenomena of the natural world. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* is part of a larger project that Smith envisioned—not only a science of humanity, to include his treatises on economics and morals, but also a study, never completed, of the humanities (language, philosophy, and art) and of jurisprudence.

For Smith, a science of morals undertakes two questions: What is virtue? And what is the power or faculty in human nature that provides the basis for living virtuously? (Smith [1759–90] 1982, 265).² Smith responds to the first question by detailing virtues such as justice, benevolence, prudence, self-command, and “humanity,” or the capacity and willingness to consider the circumstances of others. However, it is the second question that occupies Smith and animates his account of the psychological features that make moral life possible. In delineating these qualities, he paints an extraordinarily acute landscape, a phenomenology, of the moral life—what we experience when we approve, doubt, assess, award, encourage, reprove, chasten, or punish either self or others. This picture is itself a reason to read the *Moral Sentiments*, but there are more particular reasons, too.

The inspiration for these reasons draws from the reasons that Smith advances for *not* reading a certain set of books, those of late medieval thinkers, the casuists, who

1. Quite recently, two scholars (Roberts 2014; Hanley 2019) have suggested that Smith provides practical advice on how to live well.

2. During Smith's lifetime (1723–90), there were six editions of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, the first appearing in 1759, the last in 1790. All quotations from *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* come from the last edition, referenced as Smith [1759–90] 1982; subsequent citations give page references only.

sought to reach moral judgments by applying principles to particular circumstances. Of their works, Smith declares that they are “as useless as they are commonly tiresome” and that their style fails “to animate us to what is generous and noble.” He adds, importantly, that their pretense of exactitude encourages us to “chicane with our own consciences” and to “authorize evasive refinements with regard to . . . our duty” (339–40). These reasons work against the casuists, but they serve as clues to why we should read Smith’s treatise. The *Moral Sentiments* is not tiresome or useless but engaging, and if the work is not intended to inspire, it conveys nonetheless an animating or affirming message. Finally, Smith seems aware of how self-deceit, a “chicane [of the] conscience,” is a threat to the moral life, but he also reminds us how via continual interaction we might avoid this chicanery.

An Engagement of the Imagination

Many works—literary, philosophical, historical—are engaging, but Smith’s volume fascinates in a unique way: it explores how the imaginative capacity to create or utilize ideas, images, hypotheses, and metaphors forms a basis for moral judgment. In so doing, Smith’s *method* and *substantive* insights have catalytic effects on the reader’s imagination.

In the *Moral Sentiments*, Smith offers few arguments and scarcely any definitions. His method is to employ examples, allusions, and illustrations to weave a coherent narrative out of a welter of experience. A section typically commences with a proposition that characterizes some facet of our activities, judgments, or interactions. For example, the chapter on ambition opens with this assertion: “It is because mankind are disposed to sympathize more entirely with our joy than with our sorrow, that we make parade of our riches, and conceal our poverty” (50). Smith illustrates such stipulations with examples from common life, literature, and history. Sometimes the examples serve as reminders; on other occasions, they point to relationships or scenes that elicit novel perceptions or considerations. Smith does not shy from the recognition of human foible, but his examples often display congenial rather than biting wit. When he distinguishes the proud individual from the vain, he remarks that the former believes sincerely in his accomplishments; however, the vain person, who wants to present only the appearance of success, relishes the opportunity to associate with “superiors” in hopes that their “splendor” might reflect on him (257). Smith then recollects how one of the earls of Arundel “sometimes went to court, because he could there only find a greater man than himself; but that he went very seldom, because he found there a greater man than himself” (257).

The substantive principles Smith invokes to map our moral lives also relate to the imagination. The chief principle, alluded to in the quotation on ambition, is *sympathy*, the sharing of sentiments between (or among) individuals. Sympathy is not pity, compassion, or benevolence but the similitude of feelings that occur as distinct individuals experience or contemplate the same circumstances. As Smith explains, “When

we see a stroke aimed and just ready to fall upon the leg or arm of another person, we naturally shrink and draw back our own leg or our own arm; and when it does fall, we feel it in some measure, and are hurt by it as well as the sufferer” (10). In this instance, the view of another’s situation may yield an immediate sympathy, with hardly any need to engage our conscious imagination. In other cases, we must extend the imagination to consider the circumstances of another. It is possible that the effort will yield no sympathy. There will be occasions in which “[w]e . . . feel for another, a passion of which he himself seems to be altogether incapable; because, when we put ourselves in his case, that passion arises in our breast from the imagination, though it does not in his from the reality” (12).

Why make *any* effort to sympathize? Because sympathy is pleasurable: we enjoy or desire the sharing of sentiments. As a consequence, both spectator and agent endeavor to imagine how the other person might feel in his or her circumstances and to modulate their feelings so that each person’s sentiments accord with the other’s. A socializing feature of human nature, the desire for sympathy, encourages us to think about our neighbor. Even so, sympathy has its own regularities. The experience of an unpleasant passion inclines us, even more than a pleasant one, to seek sympathy: “Love is an agreeable; resentment, a disagreeable passion; and accordingly we are not half so anxious that our friends should adopt our friendships, as that they should enter into our resentments” (15). We also sympathize more easily with small rather than large joys, with great rather than small sorrows. Smith illustrates with a bit of a twist: “The man who, by some sudden revolution of fortune, is lifted up all at once into a condition of life, greatly above what he had formerly lived in, may be assured that the congratulations of his best friends are not all of them perfectly sincere” (40–41).

As both spectator and agent adjust their feelings and conduct to accord with the sentiments of others, so do they exercise their imaginations. I try to imagine what the other person is feeling in a given situation, and, importantly, I try to imagine what I would feel if I were in that situation. What occurs in this imaginative exchange? Am I simply inserting myself into the situation of another? Am I imagining myself *as* that other person? And what is the situation? The bare set of circumstances in which that person finds herself? Or does it encompass the psychological or physical features or capacities of the other person? His experience or skill level, his overall level of knowledge? Smith does not answer these questions, but his examples indicate their relevance. The desire to share similar sentiments pushes each of us to alter our imaginative perspective so that we might be *more likely* to produce sympathy than not. When we sympathize with someone, then we approve that person’s reaction; when we fail to sympathize, we disapprove. The enjoyment of sympathy is effectively a desire for approval or praise. By interacting with others, individuals adjust their imaginative perspectives, approve and disapprove, and thereby coalesce around a common imaginative point of view. Neither yours nor mine, this perspective is that of the impartial spectator.

This perspective requires a spectator to see others as independent persons who are to be understood rather than explained or categorized. The impartial point of view

conveys two normative demands, one cognitive, one affective. The cognitive requirement is that one seek as much relevant information as possible with regard to empirical circumstances and the motives or reasons of individuals situated therein. The affective demand urges one to set aside one's own preferences, interests, and valuations in order to assess how an act or event may affect the preferences and interests of others.

Smith's explanation of the substance of the moral life retains the focus on the imagination, and through his illustrative insights he encourages a similar engagement of the reader's imagination. Smith rejects, for example, the notion that utility is a significant feature of our valuations. We often think we are attracted, says Smith, to some particular benefit or beneficial item when, in fact, it is not the benefit that appeals but the process, aptness, or mechanism by which the item or its benefit is produced. He remarks on this phenomenon, itself an exercise of imagination, with some wit: "How many people ruin themselves by laying out money on trinkets of frivolous utility? What pleases these lovers of toys is not so much the utility, as the aptness of the machines which are fitted to promote it. All their pockets are stuffed with little conveniences. They contrive new pockets, unknown in the clothes of other people, in order to carry a greater number" (180).

An Affirmative Message

A second reason for reading Smith's *Moral Sentiments* rests in its affirmative message. This is not to assert that his message is optimistic, though one could interpret his account in that way. Unlike his friend Hume, Smith allows for the existence of a providential God whose overall plans point toward good. He admits, "[T]he very suspicion of a fatherless world, must be the most melancholy of all reflections" (235). But his occasional appeals to Providence allude to distant not proximate causes. One may regard his work as affirmative without having to rely on God's invisible hand. An affirmative outlook incorporates both a recognition that a situation poses a challenge and that a plausible proposal for meeting it can be devised. (In contrast, the optimistic outlook admits the challenge, proposes no way forward, yet remains hopeful.) Smith recognizes the challenge to living a moral life, yet he offers a view of how to surmount it. This outlook is affirmative, even animating.

The opening line of the *Moral Sentiments* expresses the challenge and a hint of its resolution: "How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others" (9). A paramount difficulty to living a moral life resides in human nature: we are to some degree selfish or self-centered. Early in the *Moral Sentiments*, Smith refers to "so imperfect a creature as man" (25). Many pages later—perhaps recollecting the recent earthquake in Lisbon in 1755—he imagines an earthquake in a distant land, China. How would "a man of humanity in Europe" react to the loss of great numbers of people in China? There would be expressions of sorrow and reflections on "the precariousness of human life," but this "man of humanity" would still go about his business. Smith stresses more

strongly, “If he was to lose his little finger to-morrow, he would not sleep to-night; but, provided he never saw them, he will snore with the most profound security over the ruin of a hundred millions of his brethren” (136).

The challenge Smith describes arises in part from how our affections so orient to the self that we prefer and overvalue ourselves (138). In addition, the ego may pervade our perceptions of the world, inducing us thereby to “make a report very different from what the real circumstances are capable of authorizing” (157). However, for Smith, the situation is not hopeless, and we are not, in fact, egoistic creatures. Even as our reactive feelings to events are “almost always so sordid and selfish,” we are still able to extend ourselves beyond “that feeble spark of benevolence” that is also part of our nature (137). Smith is affirmative in that he admits in realistic terms the partialities of our nature while nonetheless indicating how a perspective not oriented to the ego is available.

The impartial point of view allows one to see things as they are, thereby setting aside the priority of the self’s concerns or a tendency to see the world only as it relates to self. One of Smith’s early inspirations was the English Anglican minister Joseph Butler, who maintained that the “plain honest man” could usually find the right answer (Butler [1726] 2017, sermon 3, p. 34). In *Moral Sentiments*, Smith suggests as much regarding the impartial spectator: “If we place ourselves completely in his situation, if we really view ourselves with his eyes, and as he views us, and listen with diligent and reverential attention to what he suggests to us, his voice will never deceive us. We shall stand in need of no casuistic rules to direct our conduct” (227).

Interaction as Antidote to Chicanery

The most important reason for reading the *Moral Sentiments* is that it provides a warning against a chicanery (self-deceit) of the moral conscience, a self-flattering inversion by which one indulges one’s own particular perspective as if it expresses an impartial moral perspective. This sort of self-deceit occurs often, and it also characterizes, at least in part, the factionalism of contemporary American political life. Happily for his readers, Smith’s account illuminates a remedy.

It is essential to ask, first, whether a person has any reasons to take up the impartial perspective. It is true enough that we *ought* to do so, but the moral ought is based on the impartial spectator’s perspective. We cannot appeal to the impartial spectator in order to take up the point of view of that spectator. As if recognizing this point, Smith indicates that the presence of *actual* spectators, the persons around us whose sympathy we desire, will encourage us to take up the impartial perspective. Indeed, “the abstract and ideal spectator of our sentiments and conduct, requires often to be awakened and put in mind of his duty, by the presence of the real spectator” (153). Along these lines Smith also notes that “the wise and just man [is one] who has been thoroughly bred in the great school of self-command, in the bustle and business of the world” (146).

Without the real presence of others to catalyze the imagination, we may easily identify our own perspective with an impartial one. The mere knowledge of or sight of others is not always sufficient, as Smith makes clear in two independent considerations. In his discussion of ambition, he describes how the ease with which we sympathize with joy leads us to “parade . . . our riches, and conceal our poverty.” A few passages later he points out that the “poor man . . . is ashamed of his poverty. He feels that it either places him out of the sight of mankind, or, that if they take any notice of him, they have . . . scarce any fellow-feeling with the misery and distress which he suffers” (51). The very fact that spectators regard the poor man as suffering unpleasant emotions inclines those spectators not to imagine his situation: “The poor man goes out and comes in unheeded” (51). We categorize the poor, and on that basis we turn away and fail to consider their lived circumstances.

In another discussion independent of this one, Smith characterizes a “man of system” who is “very wise in his own conceit.” This person thinks “he can arrange the different members of a great society with as much ease as the hand arranges the different pieces upon a chessboard. He does not consider that the pieces upon the chess-board have no other principle of motion besides that which the hand impresses upon them; but that, in the great chess-board of human society, every single piece has a principle of motion of its own” (234). The man of system, dazzled by his apparent intelligence, fails to consider how the other constituents of society have their own wills, perspectives, and projects. The man of system also fails to comprehend the lived situation of others.

On Smith’s terms, the engagement with actual persons “in the bustle and business of the world” encourages and stimulates imaginative awareness of these other persons’ circumstances. But, as shown in the cases given earlier, the person who fails to consider the situation of others hardly interacts with them in any real sense. More generally, categorizations of one kind or another—“poor,” “uneducated,” “unsophisticated,” “deplorable,” and so on—give the spectator reason not to engage. There may be other structural reasons—for example, profession or neighborhood—but these conditions typically contribute to but do not define the categorization that effectively removes any motivation for considering the perspective of others. In setting aside alternative perspectives, one is left with one’s own or that of persons with outlooks congenial to one’s own.

We may extrapolate from Smith’s account to the polarized politics of contemporary society. Some contend that a set of persons, whether poor or otherwise marginalized, has hardly been *seen* much less *understood* on their own terms. That group, in turn, comes to see others in categorical terms. Another cohort of society contends, not unreasonably, that an elite class, whether political or cultural, sets forth norms and policies that ignore with systematic indifference the views of persons who have their own “principles of motion.” But these latter persons, knowledgeable of their own principles of movement, regard that elite with increasing distrust. Each group defines itself against the other group. As the world sorts itself into friends and enemies, we seek the former and shun the latter.

Smith warns explicitly that to surround ourselves only with friends risks corruption: “The propriety of our moral sentiments is never so apt to be corrupted, as when the indulgent and partial spectator is at hand, while the indifferent one is at a great distance” (154). He offers an additional warning: “Of all the corrupters of moral sentiments, therefore, faction and fanaticism have always been by far the greatest” (156). In becoming factionalized into groups whose members listen only to and interact only with themselves, we chicanery, or deceive, our conscience: we think we are moral—our friends so confirm!—when in fact we are categorizing and depersonalizing our opponents and steadfastly refusing to take up their points of view, thereby failing to respect them as persons. We separate ourselves from one another and then congratulate ourselves for not being like those from whom we separate and to whom we hardly pay any respect at all. A growing polarization, begun well prior to the U.S. election of 2016, has left us looking at the world through a binary lens of good or evil, decent or indecent, rational or irrational, legitimate or extreme, friend or enemy. We relate only to our factionalized friends, condemn the others, and felicitate ourselves on our decency and rationality. But as Smith advises, when in consort together a person’s friends are “animated by the same hostile passions which animate himself, [and] he can never please them so much as by enraging and offending their enemies. The partial spectator is at hand: the impartial one at a great distance” (154).

In this state of affairs, it is easy, if not comforting, to say, “I cannot do anything.” But one can always do something. With this in mind, it is worth recalling that from his student years at the University of Glasgow, Smith retained in his personal library a textbook, Cebes’s *Tablet* (*Tabula*), that contained a version of Epictetus’s *Handbook*, an essential part of a young man’s education at the time (Ross 1995, 40–41). A stoic, Epictetus urged that we seek to command what is within our control, not what is beyond it, and to temper our passions by considering our circumstances from alternative perspectives. In the first line of the *Handbook*, Epictetus sets forth this salient distinction: “Some things are up to us and some are not up to us” ([first–second century CE] 1983, §1). It would be absurd to think that it is not within one’s power to respect and to understand one’s fellow citizens. Respect and understanding are distinct from explanation, classification, indifference, and mockery. To fail to engage with those who may differ while nonetheless claiming the moral high ground is a gross chicanery of the conscience. To read Adam Smith is to recognize through example, illustration, and implication how one can do better.

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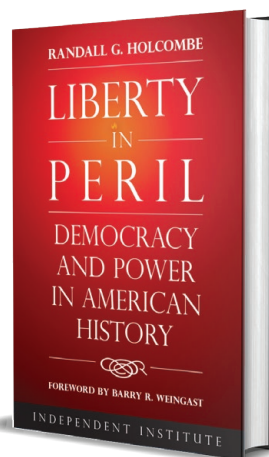
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